

A Cunning Plan by pathvain aelien

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Summary: Dustin has a plan, and Eleven hangs out with the guys, sans Mike.

A Cunning Plan

For Iron, who gave me both a push and a ton of helpful feedback. Thank you.

A Cunning Plan

They're going to have a snowman competition again, because Lucas insists on a rematch. He *always* insists on a rematch, at least whenever he's the loser. He argues that the last competition had hardly been fair, there was barely enough snow on the ground to make a snow dog (or cat, as Eleven helpfully interjected) let alone an entire snowman.

"Really, Lucas?" Dustin asks him disparagingly.

"What?"

"Are you seriously suggesting the lack of *snow* is the reason your snowman looked like that?"

Will and Mike stifle their laughter and Eleven watches them with interest.

"Like what?" Lucas asks, a little threateningly.

Dustin closes his eyes in thought, recalling Lucas's last pathetic attempt. He wants to be sure he remembers very detail clearly before responding.

"Like a hobo."

"A *hobo*? Seriously?"

"Yeah. A *hobo*. From the Upside Down," Dustin adds in a mock helpful tone. The clarification doesn't yield the desired response. Lucas is silent, and the others are still watching.

"With *leprosy*," he finishes, a little smugly.

Lucas curls his lip in disgust, and Dustin raises his hands defensively.

"What? I'm being honest here. I'm just trying to help you out with like, some constructive feedback. It sucked. *I* know it, *Will* knows it, *you* know it, everyone knows it. Is that why you want a rematch?" Dustin's already turning around and gathering snow. He doesn't mind having another competition, it's not like there's anything else to do. And Lucas is right; the snow is thick and fresh. It's actually perfect for building snowmen, not that Dustin would ever give him the satisfaction of telling him that.

But the rematch never happens. Dustin turns his face slightly toward his friend, and immediately recoils when something cold and wet hits him right in the nose.

"*Jesus!*" Dustin yells, scraping snow from his face. The guys are laughing and Eleven just looks surprised. She turns to look at Lucas, who hurriedly arranges his face into a more somber expression, because Eleven actually looks a little pissed off. At him. It's not a pleasant thought. Her eyebrows are drawn together in a slight frown and her head is lowered. Mike notices immediately and touches her shoulder lightly.

"It's okay, they aren't fighting."

"They aren't?"

"Well, they are, I guess, but it's for fun."

"Fun?"

"Yeah, like a game. They aren't angry with each other, they're just playing." He turns to look at the other guys. "Right, guys?"

"Yeah, totally," Dustin agrees. He sounds cheerful and Eleven lets herself relax. She isn't used to this type of game, but her friends seem to think it's normal. She looks at Lucas and he sees the apology in her eyes.

"It's cool, El," he reassures her. It's actually nice that she's so protective of them all. He knows she would feel the same if Dustin had pelted *him* instead. She smiles a little, in relief.

"Look, we'll show you. If you want to play?" Mike asks, and she nods.

"Okay, teams, or melee?" Mike asks them all.

"Teams," Dustin and Will answer together, and Eleven nods in agreement. Lucas shrugs, because the party has spoken and he can't really do anything about it.

"Fine, but I'm captain," Lucas says immediately.

"You're always captain," Will points out.

"Yeah, because I'm good at strategy. And keeping up morale," Lucas answers loftily, and Will snorts.

"Does anyone have a problem with Lucas being captain?" Dustin asks them all in a bossy voice. They shrug. "Okay, Sinclair will take alpha team." He exchanges meaningful eye contact with Lucas. Lucas wants to win, and the best way to do that is to keep Dustin on a separate team. They're both pretty good, but they end up squabbling over strategy. Each game ends with their own demise because they were too busy arguing with each other to notice an ambush. Dustin sees the mutinous look on his friend's face and sighs.

"Fine." He thinks about declaring himself captain, then reconsiders. He was in charge last time; it's only fair someone else takes a turn at the helm this time. He turns to Will, who's pretty good. And he's fast.

"Byers," he says, and Will looks surprised. "Yeah, you. You have been chosen. It's your *destiny*," Dustin tells him dramatically.

Lucas rolls his eyes, but shakes Will's hand gravely. It's only courteous to show your enemy respect before the battle. Will clasps his hand with equal solemnity.

"Who gets first draft pick?" He asks him. Will doesn't respond, not with words at any rate, he just holds up his hand and makes a fist. Lucas nods.

"Two out of three?" He asks. Will chooses scissors, Lucas rock.

"You always choose rock," Will complains, and Lucas rolls his eyes.

"Then why don't you ever choose paper?" He asks reasonably. Will

doesn't answer. They prepare for a second round.

"What are they doing?" Eleven asks Mike.

"They're playing rock, paper, scissors," and he briefly explains the point of the game until she understands. "They're just trying to decide who will pick first."

"Oh."

"They take this pretty seriously," Mike adds, and is surprised when Eleven laughs. It's a quiet laugh, but still a laugh, and he likes the way it sounds. He smiles at her.

"I know," she answers. Lucas and Will rejoin their friends.

"Okay! Will chooses first."

Lucas steps back, and flops to a sitting position on the porch. It's pretty cold, but what the hell. He needs to come up with a strategy. Will looks at them all, considering. Eleven hasn't played before, but she would be invaluable. Assuming that she will be okay with chucking things at her friends faces, that is. But she'd have to come with Mike, because Will already knows she'll never hit him. And *he* wouldn't hit her, either. And Mike...

Will stares helplessly at his friend, who's starting to look annoyed because he can easily read the look on his friend's face. Dustin notices and laughs.

"Not *Mike*. Mike blows dead rats," Dustin says gleefully. Eleven doesn't understand what he means, but she gets the gist, apparently, because she suddenly looks angry. He holds up his hands in surrender. "What? He's bad. Like, really bad. *Horrible*." Eleven still looks angry. Dustin sighs. "Okay, fine, he's not that bad," he amends irritably.

"Yes, he is," Lucas mutters to him under his breath.

"Yeah, I am actually aware of that, but I'd rather keep my brains intact."

Will points at Eleven, who joins him when Mike gestures. Will just stares at Mike until he joins them both, because Will knows they're a package deal.

Lucas and Dustin look both thrilled and dejected at the same time. They could either be unstoppable together, or they could spend so much time second-guessing each other that they're slaughtered. It's anyone's guess.

"Okay, let's briefly recap the rules, for our new addition," Dustin calls, nodding at Eleven. Lucas elbows him.

"I'm the general!"

"I thought you were a captain."

"*Whatever*. I'll explain the rules," he snarls, and Dustin waves him to go ahead. *Whatever*.

"Okay. *This* is base," Lucas says, indicating the porch. "The goal is to return to base unscathed. Or at least still alive." Eleven looks alarmed. "Well, we aren't *really* going to die, don't worry. Anyway, the goal is to make it back here after an hour, and before an hour and a half." He checks his watch.

"Let's synchronize our watches now. I have...two thirty." Mike checks Eleven's wrist, and sees she is indeed wearing a watch. His old watch. He grins at her and adjusts the time for her.

"Okay. So we start for base in an hour, no earlier. Anyone who doesn't make it back before an hour and a half is considered missing in action, and is disqualified. Anyone who is hit more than 10 times is deceased. And obviously disqualified. On the unlikely possibility that most of us survive, the team with the most survivors is the winner. On the even unlikelier possibility that we *all* make it back, we will have a sudden death."

Dustin and Will have tuned him out, because they play the game the same way each time. Mike is murmuring explanations to Eleven.

"Captains, you can choose your own strategy within the next ten minutes, and build your arsenal. May the best team win, and *it will*,"

he finishes smugly. He gestures to Dustin to retreat, but Eleven's voice stops him.

"What...what are we doing?"

They all look at each other blankly. Dustin steps in before Mike can.

"Oh. We're having a snowball fight. You know how Lucas hit me with snow?" She nods. "Yeah. That's what we're doing. We're going to hit each other, or try to, and then make it back to base without being disqualified."

"Oh."

Dustin grins at her sunnily.

"Here, let me show you really quickly," he says, ignoring Lucas, who is tapping his watch irritably. Dustin gathers a handful of snow and packs it, turning it into an even white lump.

"This, El, is a *snow ball*. A *snow ball*. Right, guys? Right, *Michael*?" He raises his eyebrows at Mike. Mike gives him a warning look but Lucas and Will both giggle. Eleven doesn't seem to notice the innuendo, she just nods her comprehension. "So you just make a lot of these *snow balls*, and hit the people on the other team. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Dustin. *Move your ass*," Lucas says, and Dustin turns to retreat. He sees Will do the same with his team.

"Defensive or offensive? Dustin asks Lucas casually. They know each other well; he doesn't have to phrase it any differently. Lucas considers it. Will is good at evading, but Mike sucks. Eleven is telekinetic, and they forgot to tell her not to use her powers. Too late now.

"Offensive," he says, and Dustin settles into a crouch behind a tree and within eyesight of the porch immediately. The planning is over, and it took less than 10 seconds. They start to build their arsenal.

Will and Mike are building their own arsenal, while they debate

tactics. Will's less of a demanding general than Lucas, and doesn't mind sharing the responsibility.

"You think they're going defensive or offensive?" Mike asks him.

"Offensive, what else?"

"So we stay low."

Will debates it, looking at Eleven. Thinks about her powers. Remembers that Lucas never forbid the use of them, probably because he forgot. They all do sometimes. Eleven's meeting his gaze, and her eyes are a little mischievous. She understands exactly what he's thinking. They smile at each other.

"Oh, I think we attack," Will tells Mike in a gleeful voice.

"You think?"

"Yeah, and defend at the same time." Mike grins at them both.

Dustin and Lucas have finished forming their snowballs and they're keeping an eye on the porch. It's nearly time, and the other should be heading for base any minute now. They know how quick Will is, and they think he'll make a run for it right before time expires. Mike will probably sacrifice himself to let at least one team member make it back, and as for Eleven...

"Keep a watch," Lucas says tensely. He's suddenly on point, and Dustin notices immediately. Dustin stands up straight.

"El?" He asks, and Lucas gives a terse nod. Dustin slowly turns in a circle and scans the trees. "I don't see her," he says.

"Keep looking," Lucas says. He keeps an eye on the porch, and grabs a snowball. Gets ready.

"You ready?" Mike asks her. They are nowhere near the back porch, or near Will's backyard at all. In fact, they're at Castle Byers, and squeezed inside. It's a tight fit for all three of them to sit comfortably, but it's not too bad.

"Ready," Eleven says. She looks so solemn, as if it's more than a game. It makes Mike smile a little. She's taking it as seriously as the rest of them do, but he can tell she's having fun. The thought makes him happy. She just *fits* with them, somehow. She always has. Mike touches her shoulder gently and gets up to leave.

"It will take a few minutes," he tells her, and she nods. Smiles at him.

"Good luck," Will tells her, and follows his friend.

Eleven settles in more comfortably, sitting cross-legged on Will's blankets. She's been in Castle Byers before, and she likes it a lot. It's nice. A lot nicer than the version in the Upside Down. She closes her eyes and concentrates. Waits.

"I hope this works," Will whispers as they make their way back to the house. They are moving as quietly as possible, because they aren't certain where the others are. They suspect Lucas and Dustin are sticking close to the backyard, but they aren't certain.

"It will work," Mike says, with a confidence he doesn't really feel. A silence falls as they trek back to the house. When the porch is in sight, they both pause. Will looks at Mike expectantly. Mike closes his eyes and concentrates.

"Try to keep your mind blank," Will suggests, in what's clearly meant to be a helpful voice.

"It was, until you said that."

"Oh. Sorry." Will turns back to the porch and Mike closes his eyes again. Pictures Eleven's face. Concentrates on her eyes, because that's when it always happens. When they are looking into each other's eyes.

Eleven?

He waits, but nothing happens. He can feel Will looking at him but tries to ignore him. Tries to keep his mind as blank as possible, so Eleven can find him. He's not sure it will work. They've never been able to do it from this distance before, and he doesn't actually know how the hell it works or what he should be doing to *make* it work. He

can only hope that she does.

Mike.

Her voice is quiet, but she sounds like she's right next to him. He jumps a little, and opens his eyes. Will's staring at him curiously.

I'm here. Can you hear me?

Yes. I hear you. I see you. Go now.

Mike gives Will a thumbs-up, and Will looks excited. They head for the porch, no longer bothering to keep a lookout. Eleven's doing that for them.

"See anything?" Lucas hisses.

"Again, no. How many times are you going to ask me that?"

"Shut up, Dustin. They'll be here any minute now."

"You shut up, Lucas. You should have picked El. Like, right away."

Lucas takes a deep breath. He makes a heroic effort not to bicker. He sees a flash of movement to his left. "There! Mike," he hisses at Dustin. Dustin joins him behind the tree.

"There's Will. Where's El?"

"You are supposed to be keeping a lookout, dumbass," Lucas says, and shoves him lightly. *"I'll handle them."* Dustin sighs and scans the trees again.

Mike and Will are in the back yard, approaching the porch quickly and confidently. They aren't even bothering to look around, and it's seriously freaking Lucas out. The fact that neither one of them is actually carrying a snowball is freaking him out even more. He quickly glances to the left, to see if he can spot Eleven. He turns his head to make sure Dustin's actually keeping a lookout. He is. Lucas debates the strategy quickly. If he acts alone, he may only hit one of them before the other makes it. But if Dustin helps, they could both be ambushed. He makes a split-second decision.

"Dustin. Now."

Dustin's already beside him with his hand open. Lucas places a snowball in the waiting hand and takes one for himself. They straighten at the same time and take aim, as quietly as they can.

"Three. Two. One."

They fire at the same time. Lucas can tell before it even leaves his hand, that it's right on target. It should hit Mike right in the face. Dustin's aimed for Will. They didn't even have to discuss it, they both just know. Mike turns his head toward them, because they're visible now. They've stepped out from their cover. Mike grins at the surprised expressions on their faces.

Dustin is surprised. And also not. They should have expected it, to be honest. Both of their snowballs are frozen in midair, a good foot away from their targets. Will practically skips back to base, laughing at them. Mike joins him more leisurely, as if they have all the time in the world. They settle beside each other on the step to watch.

"Lucas," Dustin says, keeping his eyes fixed on the frozen (the *frozen* frozen, his mind adds whimsically) missile.

"What?"

"*Run for it*," Dustin screeches, mere seconds before fleeing. He doesn't look back. Lucas follows as quickly as he can, but it's not quickly enough, because the snowballs have reversed themselves and are flying straight for him. Will and Mike cackle as they watch Lucas dive heroically into a bush, before being hit twice.

"That's two, Lucas!" Mike shouts. He can hear Lucas cursing as he extracts himself from the bush.

Lucas keeps running, because now he knows Eleven must be watching. Must be nearby. He sees Dustin zig-zagging in front of him and part of him approves. Always zig-zag to lessen your chances of being hit. It's part of their mantra. The rest of him is focused on circling back toward the porch and to safety. If they can make it before Eleven does, they will at least tie. And he will damned sure

put down some rules about telekinetic powers before a sudden death. He catches up to Dustin and grabs his jacket. Dustin screams.

"It's me," he pants, and keeps a grip on the jacket. He veers toward the shed, pulling Dustin with him. They take cover, panting. Lucas checks his watch. They still have time to make it.

"Seriously...you...didn't, like...think about forbidding the use of...psi powers?" Dustin asks, in between gasps.

"Shut up," Lucas snaps.

"I can't believe you didn't factor that into your strategies. You're a *terrible* general."

"*Shut up*, Dustin. It's not like *you* remembered, either."

"Yeah, but I'm just a soldier. I expected my general to come up with a plan. A good plan. *General jackass*," Dustin snaps. Lucas hits him.

"Shut up. Let me think."

"Oh great. I can't wait. Really."

Lucas ignores the sarcasm in his friend's voice. He checks his watch again and frantically racks his brains. One of them could make a run for it, while the other provides cover, but neither one of them will volunteer. And they'd still lose, so what would be the fucking point, anyway?

"Uh. Lucas?"

"I'm thinking. Shut up."

"*Lucas*."

"Dustin, will you *be quiet*!"

"LUCAS!"

"WHAT?"

Dustin points wordlessly at the white snow in front of them. The

snow is moving. It's compacting. They stare at it in horror for a second before Dustin scrambles up.

"Shit! *Run for it!* Run!" Dustin screams, panicking completely. His mouth pulls down in a grimace as if he's seen a Demogorgon in front of him, instead of a couple of snowballs forming. One of them hits Dustin before he can even take a step, and he shrieks. They *both* do. Lucas pushes Dustin in front of him and tries to shield him, never forgetting that a general wouldn't leave a soldier behind. Even if he really wanted to.

Lucas is hit three more times before he even makes it a few feet. He increases his pace.

"Zig-zag!"

"What?" Dustin shouts without turning around.

"Zig-zag, Dustin, do it!"

They both attempt to weave, but it's a little difficult since Lucas is holding onto his shoulders and they are trying to weave in different directions at the same time. They can hear Mike and Will howling. Lucas's vision is almost completely obscured. There are fucking snowballs everywhere. Coming from every angle. It looks like *hundreds* of snowballs. Lucas gives up on reaching the porch; he only wants to minimize the imminent damage. He shoves Dustin down and throws himself on top of him before the snowballs hit. It's like World War III. He suddenly understands exactly how a real general would feel, and it pretty much sucks.

"We surrender!" Dustin's muffled voice shouts from beneath him.

Mike's suddenly right next to them. "I don't think you need to surrender, you were hit way more than 10 times," he says. He's still laughing.

"Lucas! *Get off!*" Dustin says, and Lucas rolls off of him. "I appreciate the gesture, man, but you were suffocating me." Dustin scrubs his face clean of snow. It takes a long time, because Lucas shoved his face right into it. Lucas glances around, but still sees no sign of their

ambusher.

"Where is she?"

Mike's eyes dance, actually *dance*, with happiness. Lucas narrows his own.

"What? She has to be around here somewhere."

"Actually, no," Will giggles from the steps.

"No?"

"Nope."

"Where is she, then?" Dustin asks.

"Castle Byers."

Dustin and Lucas look dumbfounded.

"What? *Castle Byers*? No fucking way," Lucas exclaims.

"That is *awesome*," Dustin says, and Lucas shoots him a dirty look.

"What? It is totally awesome."

"But...*how*?" Lucas immediately shakes his head after asking. He doesn't need to ask, because he already knows. *Vulcan mind-meld*, as Dustin would say.

"That is completely and totally cheating," Lucas informs them sourly.

"Technically, no. You never said anything about telepathic OR telekinetic powers when you were laying down the rules," Dustin points out helpfully.

Lucas opens his mouth, but Dustin beats him to it.

"I know, I know. *Shut up, Dustin*," he parrots in a sing-song voice.

"Let's wait and see if she makes it to base in time."

"They win anyway," Lucas mutters, but he sits on the steps next to them. Dustin looks pointedly at Mike. Might as well bring it up now,

while Eleven's gone.

"So, Mike," Dustin says. Mike looks at him, eyebrows raised.

"Yeah?"

"When are you going to do it?"

"Do *what*, Dustin?"

Three of the four guys roll their eyes.

"Uh, *I don't know*, what *could* I be talking about? When are you going to *ask her*, dumbass."

Mike doesn't pretend to misunderstand this time. All three are watching him with interest, so he just sighs.

"Soon."

"Great. How soon is soon?"

"Soon."

Dustin's voice starts to rise with impatience. "How *soon* is soon, *Michael*?"

"Soon!"

"Like, before the actual Snow Ball? Before *next year's* Snow Ball? Before high school? Because I don't think they have Snow Balls in high school, Mike."

"They have prom," Lucas offers, and Dustin gives him a withering look.

"Or maybe you'll ask her on the honeymoon? Would that be the definition of *soon* to you, Mike? Be a little more specific, Jesus. Right, guys?" He looks at them each in turn. Mike's ignoring him, but Lucas and Will are giggling.

Dustin doesn't expect any kind of response, but he gets one. Eventually.

"I'm going to take her roller skating," Mike mumbles. The other guys look at him in surprise.

"*Roller skating?*" Lucas asks. He tries to keep his voice as bland as possible, but it must not be working, because Will is glaring at him.

"Yeah. She saw it in a movie and thought it looked cool. I thought I'd ask her there, maybe." Mike pauses for a few moments. "Is that totally lame?"

The other three look at each other.

"Uh, kind of," Lucas starts, but Dustin and Will hit him at the same time.

"No. If it's something she wants to do, then no. She'll love it," Will reassures him.

"Roller skating's fun. And you can couple-skate," Dustin adds. He wonders if he should add something about it being romantic, but refrains. The actual word might make him gag a little. Will and Dustin both scowl at Lucas until he capitulates. Mike needs the entire party behind him.

"Yeah, couple-skating. She'll like that," he says. And she will. It's not how he asked Max, but Max is a completely different type of girl than Eleven.

"Are you actually going to *ask* her, though? Or just skate around holding hands?" Dustin asks. He can't resist. Mike doesn't respond and Dustin sighs. Nope, he's definitely not going to ask her.

It's five minutes before time expires when Eleven emerges from the woods. She takes her time, because there's really no rush. They all stare at her as she walks serenely toward them. She stands on the porch right in front of them and smiles. Her nose is bleeding but that's definitely not out of the ordinary. Mike hands her a handkerchief that he keeps especially for this purpose.

"Thank you," she says.

She takes a little peek at Lucas and Dustin, to see if they're angry.

Dustin is grinning at her.

"That was pretty awesome," he says. Lucas snorts, but he does smile at her, so she knows he isn't mad. He's only sulking a little, mostly because she's never been in a snowball fight before. And it's kind of a rite of passage to be hit with one. At least once. He turns slightly and nonchalantly lays one hand near the snow on his left. Dustin sees him and leans forward a little to cover him. Eleven hasn't noticed, she's talking to Mike. Lucas figures that's the only way it will actually work, anyway, if she's too distracted to notice before it happens.

"You want cocoa?" Mike asks them all, but he's looking at Eleven. She nods. He suddenly remembers that they aren't actually at *his* house, and turns to Will. Will nods.

"Yeah, I have some. Mom bought like a year's supply," he jokes. They stand up and Lucas spins around so suddenly they falter. He's thrown before he even finishes turning. Eleven is still looking at Mike, but it doesn't matter. The snow never hits her, it stops inches away from her face. She turns to meet his eyes.

"Oops," Lucas says lamely, and Dustin giggles. Lucas ducks before the snowball can change direction and hit him.

"El, seriously, you like, *need* this experience." Eleven shakes her head emphatically. *No*.

"It's fun!" He sees her skeptical look. "Well, not really fun when it actually *hits* you, but it's fun after. I promise!" She's still skeptical, because it didn't look like they were having fun when they were running and screaming. It looked like they were having the *opposite* of fun.

Dustin and Lucas eye each other at the same time. Dustin nods almost imperceptibly. They both lean over to grab a handful of snow.

"You know you're never going to win, right?" Mike asks in amusement. Eleven watches them both calmly, waiting for them to throw. And Lucas does, but he doesn't aim at *her*, which throws her off guard. He throws it hard, straight at Mike's face. And there's no time for Mike to duck, because he wasn't expecting it either. But

Lucas is banking on her reaction, and he doesn't think he'll be disappointed.

And he's not. Mike fumbles backward a little, expecting a faceful of snow and ice, but nothing happens. Eleven immediately focuses on Mike, and the snowball halts. It's less than an inch from his face, which is very close, but she wasn't expecting it to hit *Mike*. She's still focused on Mike when *Dustin's* snowball hits the side of her face. She jerks a little in surprise because it's cold and wet and it stings a little. The snowball in front of Mike drops to the ground and splatters as her concentration breaks.

She turns silently toward Dustin, wiping her face. Mike shoots him a dirty look.

"What? " Dustin asks, but he backs up quickly. "That *is* actually the point of a snowball fight, *Michael*," he says, from the safety of a few yards away. Lucas has retreated, too, just in case. Eleven doesn't look angry, though. She's smiling a little, and they both exhale with relief.

Eleven is smiling, because Eleven is happy. She has a plan. She waits until Lucas and Dustin return to the porch. As soon as they're both under the awning, she's ready. She turns her face slightly so they don't see the concentration on her face. The snow on the roof abruptly cascades down on Lucas and Dustin. They both splutter. It's a lot of snow. Eleven smiles again as the others laugh.

Dustin brushes what feels like a foot of snow off his shoulders.

"Fair enough," he says agreeably.

"Truce?" Lucas asks.

She's not sure what that means, so she turns her face a little toward Mike. He's ready with an answer, as he usually is.

"It means you both give up. No more snowballs," he tells her. She nods and turns back to her other friends.

"Yes. Truce."

"Good! Now we can celebrate our truce with cocoa," Dustin says,

opening the door and leading the way. Will grabs the mugs while Dustin gets the milk from the fridge. Lucas scrounges in the cabinet for the mix.

Will distributes the mugs, handing one to Eleven. She turns her face to his with a little smile and he stops. She stops smiling at the look on his face.

"What's...what's wrong?" She asks hesitantly.

"You're bleeding," he says, and her hand automatically rises to her nose.

"No, not there." He sets the mug on the counter and touches her cheek. "Here." Then he feels Mike beside him and jumps back, as if her skin has burned him. Will still feels a little awkward around her ever since the Christmas party, or at least when Mike's around. Mike hasn't said a word and seems to be over it, but he's not taking any chances. Mike doesn't even notice but Dustin does. Mike's moved in front of Eleven to look at her face. Will's right. Her face *is* bleeding. There's a long cut down one cheek. It doesn't look deep, but it's definitely bleeding.

He gives Dustin a dirty look. It's easy to do, because Lucas and Dustin are now hovering near Eleven as well. Dustin raises his hands immediately.

"I didn't mean to! There must have been a rock in the snow." Mike can't argue with that, he knows it was an accident. Dustin turns to her contritely. "I'm sorry, El, I didn't know."

"It's okay," she says, and it is. She didn't even notice. The snowball stung, but ice stings. It didn't really hurt. She smiles at him because he looks upset.

Mike reaches for her hand and leads her into the bathroom to clean her face. "You have band aids?" He asks Will, and Will nods.

The other guys stand awkwardly in the kitchen for a few seconds. Will eventually grabs the mugs and starts to mix up the cocoa. Dustin is staring at the floor.

"oh my god oh my god oh my god," Dustin mutters in a breathless voice. Lucas hits him, but it's a gentle one.

"Hey. It's okay. Just an accident," he tells him. Dustin raises his face.

"Huh?"

"It was just an accident. Don't feel bad about it."

"Oh. I wasn't." Lucas raises his eyebrows and Dustin quickly amends, "Well, yeah, obviously I *do*, but that's not what I was thinking about."

"What were you thinking about, then?"

Dustin grins. "I have a plan."

Lucas and Will make eye contact and shrug. They both turn back toward Dustin. "What kind of plan?"

"A cunning one."

"Okay. Great. That helps a lot," Lucas sighs.

Dustin looks toward the doorway, but they're safe.

"Guys," he whispers.

"Uh, why are you whispering?" Lucas asks. Definitely not using a whisper himself.

Dustin ignores him. He's looking at Will. "I saw the way you jumped when you were touching her face," he says.

Will shrugs uncomfortably.

"No, I know. No big deal. You were just worried about what Mike would think, right?" He doesn't wait for Will to respond. "Yeah! Because Mike totally lost his shit at your mom's party. Remember?" He doesn't wait for either of them to respond this time. "And that gave me an idea."

Will already doesn't like the sound of the idea, but Lucas pipes up, "What idea?"

"We need to make Mike lose his shit."

"What?"

"Guys. Are you seriously this dense? *Seriously?*" He doesn't wait for them to respond. "Okay. Let me just walk you both through it," he tells them as if he's astounded by how slow they are. "Mike was a little jealous."

"A lot jealous," Lucas supplies.

"Shut up. Mike was jealous, right? And he was a little jealous when El and I hung out at my house."

"When did you-" Lucas begins.

"Shut up. After the fashion show." Lucas rolls his eyes.

"It was not a *fashion show*, Dustin."

"*Shut up!* Seriously. Okay. We need to make him jealous. Like, really jealous. We need to make him totally lose his shit."

His friends are looking at him in bewilderment and Dustin sighs and throws up his hands in exasperation. "Guys! Come on. This is not beyond your mental skills, I promise. Mike was freaking jealous. His head looked like it was going to like, spin around like the kid in *The Exorcist*."

"Gross," Will says. Dustin ignores him.

"I'm telling you, Mike is freaking out about the Snow Ball and shit. He's *never* going to ask her."

"He said he was going to ask her when they go roller-skating," Lucas says. The other two just look at him. "Yeah, I know. But he asked her last year!"

"Yeah, and she like, almost died two minutes later. And then she was gone for a year, and we all thought she was dead. He's too freaked out about it to ask her. He's like, got a mental idea it's cursed or something. *But we can make him do it.*"

"How?" Lucas asks, and Dustin slaps one hand over his right eye.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Dustin moans. "If we make him jealous, he'll be forced into asking her. He'll have to!" Lucas finally gets it, Dustin can tell. He looks excited, but Will's already shaking his head emphatically.

"That is a seriously horrible plan, Dustin."

"No! It's a *cunning* plan. A party member requires assistance. And when a party member needs assistance, we all help. We *have* to."

"That is not helping! You can't just start hitting on *Eleven*."

Dustin sighs. "I'm not going to hit on Eleven, you idiot. But we'll all hang out with her. A lot."

"We *already* hang out with her a lot."

"No! *One on one*. Without Mike. I'm telling you, he was freaked out when he saw us hanging out at my house. Just for a minute, but he was. And if we all do it, and especially if *you* do it," Dustin jabs a finger at Will, "he will fucking ask her to the ball. You know, before the ball is actually fucking over with for the year."

"That doesn't seem fair to Eleven, it's using her."

"It's not! We like hanging out with her anyway, right? She's our friend, *right*? And we'll *actually enjoy* hanging out with her, right? It's just going to have an awesome side effect. I'm telling you, they will both thank us later." Will still doesn't look convinced, but Dustin's finished for now, because Mike and Eleven are coming back in.

Dustin fixes a smile on his face immediately, and then remembers that he should be looking solemn, considering he accidentally hurt her. "You okay?" He asks, and she nods.

"Cool Band-Aid," Lucas offers, and she smiles. It's a *Star Wars* Band-Aid.

Will hands her a cup of cocoa, the only one he's actually made so far, and quickly busies himself fixing the rest. Mike's looking at them

oddly, probably because Dustin can't keep from beaming with pleasure. He's trying to mask it with solemnity but it's just making him look nauseous.

"Are you okay, Dustin?" Mike asks.

"Totally! I just, um. Feel bad. You know." And he gently pats Eleven's shoulder, making eye contact with Mike as he touches her. Lucas turns away immediately to hide his laughter, because this first attempt at inducing jealousy is fucking pathetic. Will can't even look; he keeps his eyes on the mugs in front of him. Mike gives them a baffled look, because something is seriously wrong with them, but opens the cabinet to find the marshmallows.

The next day, they're finally ready to execute the plan. Mike is sick. His mother is forcing him to stay on bedrest, so it's the perfect time to act. They've gathered at Will's. Dustin helpfully brought notebooks to write down their ideas. It's always important to stay organized. Lucas is eager, because Mike is taking *forever*. Fucking forever. Will is resigned, because he knows he won't be able to stop them. He hopes he'll at the very least be able to rein them in a little.

They are sitting at Will's kitchen table, but Dustin has already named it the war table. Dustin slides a notebook to each of his friends.

"What is this for?" Lucas asks, opening it. The pages are blank.

"For our ideas, Lucas. *Jesus*."

Lucas sighs and accepts a pen from Dustin.

"Just so you both know, I'm not okay with this," Will says.

"Duly noted. Okay. We all know the goal. Now is the time for action. Mike has the flu. We can expect him to be on house arrest for at least four days, maybe more. That gives us time."

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to hang out with Eleven."

"Yeah, dumbass, I did kind of know that already. I meant, what are

we going to actually *do*?"

"That's what we're here for. We all need to hang out with her, and do something with her that will make Mike jealous. Like, he was a little upset that she drank a coke with me."

"She drank a *coke*? With *you*?" Lucas's eyes bulge slightly.

"Yeah, like that. That's the way *he* looked. Anyway, so we need to come up with some other ideas."

"Yeah, but how is Mike even going to know about it?" Will asks.

"I'm glad you asked, Byers, I'm glad you asked. Okay. One of us will be reporting back to Mike. We'll take turns, but feel free to embellish all you want. Just improvise."

Improvise, Lucas writes in his notebook. Will leans his head back against the chair and sighs.

"Okay. Ideas. Anyone?"

An hour later, after some bickering (from Lucas and Dustin) and sighing (Will), they've managed to come up with a few ideas. "Okay. We're ready to start phase 1."

"How many phases are there?" Lucas asks, flipping through his notebook to see if he's written that somewhere. Dustin refrains from hitting him.

"As many as we need. The Snow Ball is looming. We have to act fast." He looks meaningfully at the latest Byers phone on the wall.

"*Now*?"

"No time like the present."

"Who goes first?"

They all stare at each other.

"I'll go first," Dustin decides. "We've already hung out before. Then

you, Lucas. Then Will. He's the big guns." Will snorts. Dustin pushes the chair back and heads for the phone, before anyone can talk him out of it. He dials Eleven's number. He fully expects Hopper to answer, and he's prepared for that.

"Yeah?" It's definitely Hopper. It's kind of obvious, considering that Eleven is not a grumpy old guy.

"Hey, Hop. How's *Days*? Anyone getting buried alive today?" He asks cheerfully. Will drops his forehead to the table. His head makes a little thunk, but Dustin has no trouble hearing the click in his ear as Hopper hangs up. Undaunted, he dials again. The phone ceases ringing, but no one says anything. There's just silence.

"Hopper?"

"What?"

"Can I talk to...*her*?"

Hopper sighs. Drops the phone without a reply. Dustin waits, but he doesn't hear a dial tone, so he takes that as an encouraging sign.

"Hi."

"Hey! How's it going?"

"Dustin?"

"Yep."

"Good. How are you?"

"Great! Listen, do you want to hang out today?"

There's a little silence. "Yes. Mike's?" They usually hang out in Mike's basement.

"Nah, not at Mike's. He's sick."

"Sick?" And there's definite concern in her voice.

"Yeah, he'll be fine though. No big deal. He just won't be able to hang

out for a few days or we'd all catch it."

"Oh."

"So anyway, you want to hang out?"

"Yes."

"Awesome. You want to go to a movie? Like, a real movie." Eleven responds in the affirmative, so Dustin takes his chance. "Ask Hopper if it's okay, all right? If he can drop you off." She drops the phone immediately, but he was expecting that. He waits, overhearing some muttered conversation. Half of it sounds like wheedling. He knows Hopper doesn't like her out in public, but he usually relents as long as there aren't many people around. Or if he can chaperone. Dustin sincerely hopes he doesn't end up sharing a tub of popcorn with Hopper. *Gross.*

"Okay," Eleven tells him, and he grins. Shoots a thumbs-up at the guys. Will reluctantly rises from his seat. Dustin tells Eleven when to meet him, then hangs up. He turns to Will.

"All right. You're up." Will shrugs his coat on and searches for his gloves. He grabs a handful of comics without even glancing at them. Lucas looks at Dustin.

"What about me?"

"Go home and grab your super-comm. Wait for the signal."

Mike feels awful. He feels too awful to even argue about being stuck on bedrest. He's actually *enjoying* the bedrest, which probably means he's dying. Nancy's spraying Lysol on his door every half hour or so in case any germs are floating out in that direction, but he feels too terrible to give a shit about it. He doesn't even give a shit about the fact that both of his nostrils are plugged with Kleenex. It just saves time and effort, because he knows his nose is going to run. Constantly. He breathes through his mouth instead.

Someone knocks at the door but he doesn't bother answering. If it's Nancy, she'll just start spraying Lysol as she enters, just on the off chance she can hit any germs before they actually touch her. If it's his

mom, she'll bustle in with soup or a ginger ale. But no one comes in, and no one is spraying Lysol, either.

"Yeah?" He calls weakly. He sits up a little when Will opens the door. They regard each other in surprise. Mike is surprised because he wasn't expecting his friends, and Will is surprised because Mike appears to have tissues shoved in his nostrils. Mike hastily remembers that and rips them out.

"That's a good look for you," Will teases gently. Mike tosses the Kleenex at him. They both watch as the Kleenex makes it about three inches before falling to the bed. Mike flops back onto his pillows.

"What's up?"

"Just wanted to see how you were doing," Will says, looking at Mike's clammy face. "I can see the answer is not good."

"Yep."

"Here, I brought you some comics in case you get bored." He thrusts them at Mike, trying not to get too close.

"Thanks, Will," Mike says, and smiles. "What are you guys up to? Not hanging out today?"

Will's moved over to the window. He glances out. Lucas is parking his bike next door. He arrived a little later because he didn't want to take Mirkwood. Will doesn't mind taking Mirkwood anymore; he figures nothing worse can happen at this point. Lucas looks up and sees Will, gives him a thumbs-up. Will turns back to Mike.

"Nah. Lucas is at the movies. I saw Dustin for a bit but he had plans. I'm not sure what he's doing, but he seemed really excited," Will lies. He gingerly sits on the foot of the bed. "You need anything?"

"Nah. Thanks, though. I'll live...I assume so, anyway." Mike's flipping through the stack of comics when his super-comm crackles on his dresser.

"Mike. Do you copy? Over."

Mike looks at it. It looks like it's a million miles away. Will grabs it and reluctantly hands it over. Mike takes it and goes into a fit of coughing, because apparently moving approximately six inches was a little too much for his body at this point.

"Yeah, Lucas. I copy. Over," Mike wheezes in between coughs.

"Dude. I'm at the movies. Over," he says. Will suddenly realizes that the super-comm's signal would most definitely not reach that far, and he makes a pained face. Apparently Mike's too feverish to notice that little flaw in the plan.

"Yeah? So? Over"

"Dustin's here. You'll never guess who he's with." Lucas pauses and then remembers. "Over."

Mike doesn't really feel like playing guessing games. "Max? Over."

"No!" Lucas sounds almost offended. "Max is in *California*. Over."

"I don't know, Lucas. Who? Over."

"*Eleven*."

Will makes eye contact with the floor as Mike suddenly sits up. He doesn't even notice that Lucas didn't end the communication properly.

"What? Eleven and Hopper? Over."

"No. Just Eleven. *Eleven and Dustin*." Mike goggles at Will, but Will's staring at the carpet. He's not thrilled, because Eleven hasn't been to a real movie yet. They were all going to take her. But it's not really a big deal, either. She'll have a good time with Dustin.

"Oh. Cool. Over," he says.

Lucas waits, because Mike doesn't sound like he's losing his shit. Not even a little. Not at all.

"That's it? Over." Lucas's voice is suddenly a lot higher than usual.

"Yeah...why? They're friends. Over."

"But...they're hanging out...*alone*?" Lucas sounds almost hopeful. "Over."

"So? They've done that before. Over."

Lucas stares around his room, looking for inspiration. He never expected Mike to be totally calm. He doesn't sound like he cares *at all*, actually. Maybe he's delirious. He's not sure what to do now, because Dustin didn't plan for this. *Improvise*.

"But...they're *sharing popcorn*!" He tries to make it sound as scandalous as possible. "Over!"

Mike is suddenly laughing. "Okay. I'll alert the media," Mike says in between giggles. "Over."

"And a *coke*! She's drinking a *coke*!"

"Lucas, are you okay? Over."

Lucas is most definitely not okay. He's seething, in fact. "But...Mike. *You like her*. And Dustin is at the movies with her. *Sharing a popcorn*. Seriously."

Mike's still laughing. "Lucas, we *all* share popcorn every time we go to a movie. It means that we like popcorn, and only want to buy one. Who cares? Over."

Lucas gives up. He'll let Dustin handle this. "Fine. I was just trying to look out for you. Jesus. Over."

"Um, okay. Thanks? Over and out," Mike says, and turns off the super-comm. Will's staring at him with a little smile on his face. Mike misinterprets it, thinks Will is smiling about the frenzy in Lucas's voice. He laughs again, and then coughs. "Ow."

Lucas sulks for a couple of hours, until Dustin's voice emanates from his super-comm.

"Well? Did it work? Over."

"No, Dustin. No, it did not. Over."

"But he was jealous, right? Over."

"Nope. Not at all. Over."

"*Shit*." Dustin pauses. "Well, the movie was awesome. El really liked it. Over."

"Great. Now what? Over."

"Phase 2, I guess. You're up. Over."

"Seriously? It's not going to work. He didn't care. He was *laughing*, for fuck's sake."

"Well, the worst that could happen is that he doesn't give a shit, but oh well. El's fun to hang out with, so it's kind of a win-win for us anyway. Over."

"Fine. Over and out."

The next day, Dustin makes up his own lame excuse to visit Mike. Mike's already been inundated with comics from Will, so he brings over a box of instant soup and an Atari game that Mike hasn't played before.

"Here," Dustin says, unceremoniously thrusting the game at him. Mike takes it. *Paperboy*.

"Cool, I haven't played it yet."

"I know. That's why I brought it," Dustin says, rolling his eyes. "Brought you some soup, too." Mike looks at Dustin's hands, which are empty.

"Oh! Here. I didn't like, make it or anything. I figured your mom could do that." Dustin unzips his backpack and removes the box of instant chicken soup. He tosses it on the bed.

"Thanks?" Mike asks. It's a nice gesture, anyway. "How was the movie?" Mike pulls the covers up to his chin, because it's a little

chilly. To him, anyway. Dustin is already sweating because there are two heaters blasting right in his face. Mike's a little old lady when he has the flu, Dustin muses. Dustin shrugs off his jacket and tosses it on the floor.

"It was awesome!" He takes one more stab at inducing some jealousy. Any amount of jealousy, actually. "El had a blast. Like, an absolute *blast*." Mike just nods, and Dustin sighs a little. "I've never seen her that happy, actually," Dustin informs him.

"Cool, I'm glad she liked it." And that's it. Mike looks completely serene, just happy she had a good time. Dustin feels both admiration and irritation, and he's not sure which one is the winning emotion at the moment. He abandons the attempt for now, setting up the game instead.

"I'll be right back," Dustin says as casually as possible.

"Where are you going?"

"Um." Dustin looks around the room. Spies the box of soup. "Soup! I'll make you some soup. Yeah. Soup."

"I'm really not that hungry," Mike starts, but Dustin's already grabbed the box.

"You're just too sick to *know* you're hungry. It will make you feel better," Dustin calls as he practically sprints for the door.

Mike tucks some hair behind his ears and picks up the controller. Dustin is acting pretty weird, but that's not actually abnormal.

Dustin is in the kitchen, but he's not making soup. He's speaking into his headset.

"Lucas. You copy? Over." He waits a few seconds. "LUCAS. YOU THERE? OVER."

"I copy, I'm here. Over."

"Are you ready? Over."

"She's on her way. Give me ten minutes. Over."

"Copy that, ten minutes. Over and out." Dustin walks quickly back to Mike's room. Mike's engrossed in the game, so Dustin settles into the chair next to his bed. The paperboy gets attacked and presumably eaten by a dog. Watching the dog devour the paperboy, Dustin says sadly, "I miss Dart."

Mike gives him an odd look. "He ate your *cat*."

"Yeah, but he also ate nougat. And he didn't eat me, or Steve."

"True." Mike throws the controller down. "This game is impossible," he says, turning his head toward Dustin. "Where's the soup?"

"Huh?"

"The *soup*. I thought you were making soup?"

Shit. Dustin has forgotten about the fucking soup. "Well, you said you didn't want it, so..." he trails off lamely. Mike stares at him blankly and Dustin stares back at him, equally blankly.

"Dustin. She's here. Get ready. Over," Lucas's voice hisses in his ear. Dustin leaps up from the chair immediately.

"But obviously you do! Want it. I'll just go make it," he says. Mike tries to stop him, but he's already out the door. Dustin is definitely acting bizarre, but Mike can't tell if it's the fever or not. Maybe Dustin is being perfectly normal and Mike's just hallucinating. Maybe he just needs to rest. He settles back against his pillow.

"Copy that, Lucas. Over and out," Dustin says quietly. He rummages in the bottom cabinets until he finds a saucepan. He dumps the box of soup into it and adds water, not bothering to read the instructions or measure anything. Who gives a shit, to be honest. He slams the saucepan onto a burner and turns it on low before running back upstairs.

"It's cooking, cool your jets," He tells Mike irritably when Mike starts to rise from his pillows. Dustin strides over to the window. "What you need it a little fresh air, Mike." He opens the curtains and Mike

cringes.

"Dustin, don't open the window, I'm freezing," Mike says weakly. Dustin snorts. It's at least 90 degrees in Mike's room, which is definitely a degree or two above freezing, the last time he checked.

"Fine. A little sunshine then. It will cure you right up," Dustin says, staring out the window at Lucas's house. He doesn't see anyone yet.

"So....El," Lucas says lamely. He's never been alone with her before, and he has no idea what to say. He's not as garrulous as Dustin and can't improvise as well. Eleven just looks at him. She's not the most loquacious person in the world, either. They're both still standing in the entryway and just staring at each other.

"Um. You want to ride bikes?" Lucas figures he'll just cut to the chase, although he wishes now that Dustin had been in charge of phase 2. Phase 1 would have been easier; you don't have to make conversation during a movie.

"I don't know how," she tells him.

"Yeah, I know. I could teach you, if you want me to." He sincerely hopes she wants to, because that's all Dustin came up with at the war table.

Eleven thinks it over. Riding bikes is normal. And being on a bike is fun. She knows Mike wanted to teach her because he told her. She would like to learn, but she also wants to ride with Mike. She wonders if she can still ride on his bike, even if she learns how to ride one. Maybe Hopper will give *her* a bike. And Mike can ride with her, instead.

She smiles at the thought and Lucas smiles back in relief. He leads her to the back door. She follows slowly, looking around with interest. She's never been inside Lucas's house before. She doesn't get much of a chance to look around before she's back outside again. Lucas wheels his bike toward the fence, glancing up to make sure Mike's window is in view. It is. He sees Dustin.

"Okay! Here," Lucas says, gesturing toward his bike. Back at Eleven.

Then he realizes that he never really discussed this part with the guys. How the hell is he supposed to teach someone to ride a bike? He racks his brains trying to think of when his parents taught him, but all he remembers is his dad holding on to the end of the bike and running behind him. And that's not very helpful, to be honest.

"Um." He figures she should actually get on the bike, first, and then maybe he'll be able to improvise. "You've seen us on bikes, right? Just climb on. I'll hold it steady, okay?" She nods and hesitantly does so. He keeps a tight grip on the handlebars. Okay. Now what?

"Put your feet on the pedals," he says, then pauses. And then what? *Pedal? Jesus.* If she falls, Mike will kill him. Although can she actually fall? He's not sure. "And then you just move your feet forward to pedal, and don't lean to one side. And...um. You can brake by reversing your feet, but brake slowly, not all at once, okay?" He feels like he's forgetting something. He scratches his head absently and glances up at the window. It's still just Dustin. Apparently Dustin's making sure he doesn't fuck this up before getting Mike. Probably a good idea, actually.

"Okay, so when you're ready, I'll get behind you and hold on to the seat to keep you steady at first. And I'll run behind you, so you don't have to worry. Okay? Just don't go too fast at first. And brake before we get to the other fence."

Lucas checks her face quickly, making sure she's actually enthusiastic. If she looks scared, or hesitant, he's calling it off. It's not worth it, Mike will just have to man up and ask her without their help. But she looks excited. He stands behind her and gently pushes her with one hand while holding the handlebar in the other, turning her around to face the right direction.

"You ready?"

"I'm ready," Eleven replies.

"Okay, pedal, and oh! If you want to turn, move the handlebar in that direction. But you don't actually need to turn, just go straight. Anyway. Okay, go!" And she starts pedaling. Lucas runs behind her, but she's actually pretty good. She isn't wobbly at all, although maybe

she's using her powers. He can't tell.

She brakes a little too hard and Lucas knocks into the bike, but it doesn't tip over, because she *is* using her power this time. She turns a glowing face toward him and he grins.

"Pretty fun, right?"

"Yes!"

"Want to go again?" She nods. She's already turning the bike to face the right direction.

Dustin watches from the window, making sure Lucas doesn't accidentally kill her or anything. But it looks like it's going okay, she's slowly riding in a circle in Lucas's yard. Lucas isn't holding on anymore, but he's still running behind her just in case. Dustin figured she would be fine, it's not like she can fall off a bike, anyway. He hopes.

"Is the soup ready?" Mike asks him, because Dustin's been staring out the window for a few minutes. Or longer. He's not actually sure, because he dozed off for a bit.

"What?"

"The soup?"

"Yeah, yeah. In a minute," Dustin says dismissively.

Mike sighs.

"Would you look at that!" Dustin marvels.

"What?"

"*That!*" Dustin gestures to the window.

"I can't see *that*, whatever *that* is."

"Get up," Dustin says reasonably.

"Why?"

"Lucas is teaching Eleven to ride a bike."

Mike bolts up again, all thoughts of soup forgotten.

"*What?*"

"Yeah, look!" Dustin jabs a finger at the window, but Mike doesn't move.

"Nah, that's okay," Mike says, and settles back into his pillows.

Dustin gives him a look. An *are you fucking kidding me* look.

"*Riding a bike!* Lucas is teaching her to ride a bike! Didn't *you* want to teach her that?"

"Yeah, but I'm sick."

"*Jesus Christ.*"

"What?"

"Aren't you...jealous?"

Mike laughs. "No. I'm a little disappointed, but it's not a big deal. How's she doing? Does she look like she's having fun?"

"Yes," Dustin says moodily. "She's having a blast."

"Cool."

"Yeah. Cool." He abruptly leaves the window and stalks toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To get the fucking soup! *Jesus.*"

Dustin stomps down the stairs and into the kitchen. The soup looks disgusting. Maybe he should have stirred it, because the noodles and seasonings are all in a big clump in the middle of the saucepan. It's so brightly yellow it looks radioactive. He grabs the handle and gives it a shake. Good enough. He didn't come over here to make Mike lunch,

for fuck's sake. He came over here to help him get a date. Dustin dumps it into a bowl and grabs a spoon before pressing the send button on his super-comm.

"Lucas. You copy? Over."

He waits a minute, poking at the soup with his spoon. *He* wouldn't eat it, that's for damn sure. Maybe he should have read the instructions. He figures Mike won't notice the difference.

"I copy. Over."

"Proceed to Plan B. Over."

"Plan B? Are you sure? Over."

"Yes! *Move your ass! Plan B.* Over!"

"*Fine.* Jesus. Over and out."

Dustin grabs the bowl and heads back upstairs.

"Thanks, Dustin," Mike says gratefully, accepting the bowl.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

"Any crackers?"

Dustin looks at him disbelievingly. "No, Mike. There are no crackers."

"Oh." Mike shrugs and takes a sip. It doesn't taste bad, or at least he doesn't think so. He can't really taste it, actually, but it's warm and it feels good in his sore throat.

Dustin takes up his post near the window again. Lucas and Eleven are talking. Lucas is gesturing toward the bike. Eleven nods. Eleven gets off the bike, and Lucas gets on. Eleven climbs on after him and grabs the back of his jacket with both hands.

"Okay, Mike," Dustin snaps impatiently. "*Now* look. Seriously."

"Why? Did she fall?" Mike drops the bowl on his nightstand and throws his legs over the side of the bed. He's wearing Star Wars

pajamas, Dustin notices. He has the same pair at home. He doesn't answer, because he figures if Mike's worried, at least he'll make it to the fucking window this time. Dustin moves out of the way, both so Mike has a better view, and also to avoid any germs. Although it's probably a little late for that.

Mike gapes at them both through the window. They are both laughing. Eleven has her arms around Lucas, because she's riding behind him. With him. On the same bike.

"...Huh."

Dustin beams at him, then pulls his mouth down into an appropriately somber expression. "I know, Mike, I know," he says in his best comforting voice. Apparently it doesn't work, because Mike just looks at him in bewilderment. Dustin waits, studying Mike's face carefully. Mike looks surprised. Is it a *jealous* kind of surprise? He can't really tell. Mike looks a little wistful, so that's something. It's a *start*, anyway.

Mike is feeling wistful. Eleven and Lucas are obviously having a great time. The sun is shining and the snow looks beautiful. He wishes he weren't sick, so he could join them.

"Aren't you jealous? *At all?*" Dustin asks angrily, and Mike turns to him again.

"What? Why?"

Dustin just points out the window. His face is red with irritation.

"Um...are you okay?" Mike asks in concern. "You're starting to look a little feverish. I hope *you* aren't getting sick."

Dustin just stares at him, open-mouthed. "I am actually feeling sick, *Michael*. Really sick," Dustin bites the words off. Mike glances away and back out the window. Lucas and Eleven are both looking up. Lucas looks triumphant, Eleven radiant. Mike waves at her-waves at them both. Lucas returns the wave and Eleven smiles. Mike leans a little closer to the window and gazes at them for a few seconds. He waves again and starts to turn away, to get back into bed. His legs

are feeling weak and he's shivering again.

Mike.

"Yeah?" He asks aloud. Dustin just looks at him, eyebrows raised. Oh.

Yeah?

Are you feeling better?

Not really. Soon, though. Are you having fun with Lucas?

Yes. I can ride a bike now.

That's awesome. You can still ride with me, though. Whenever you want.

I know. I will.

Mike can feel her smile, light and gentle in his mind. It actually makes him feel better, for a little while at least.

I'll see you soon, he thinks at her.

Okay. He feels her pause. *I miss you.*

Dustin watches in incredulity as Mike suddenly beams with happiness. Phase 2 sucks. *Plan B* sucks. All its done is make Mike look happier than ever. Which is kind of the point, but only after he gets a date to the Snow Ball. He watches as Mike practically floats back into bed.

I miss you, too.

Mike's staring dreamily at a box of Kleenex, and Dustin's ready to get the hell out of here before he gags.

"I'm heading out," he tells him. Mike looks at him, still smiling a little. Dustin grimaces.

"Oh. Okay. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Dustin says through clenched teeth. Then he tries to smile. "Finish your soup."

"Thanks, Dustin."

"Anytime," Dustin says, grabbing his backpack. As soon as he closes Mike's door, he presses the send button on his super-comm. "Abort. Over."

"It didn't work?"

"No. It didn't. And say 'over.' Over."

"Your plan *sucks*, Dustin. Over."

"*Shut up*, Lucas. Over."

"Didn't he care at *all*? Over."

"Nope. Over."

"Maybe he's too sick, or something?" Lucas forgets to say "over" again.

"Too sick to care about *Eleven*? He must be fucking dying, then. Over."

There's a pause. "Well, you want to hang out with us? I'm going to show her how to use the wrist rocket. Over."

Dustin's already down the steps. "Cool. Be there in a minute. Over and out."

The following day, the boys are gathered around the war table again. Phases 1 and 2 have failed. That only leaves one phase, but Will is resisting.

"It's not working," Lucas says.

"No shit," Dustin grumpily retorts.

"But you had fun, right?" Will's trying to look on the bright side, since his friends are obviously dejected.

"Yeah, but Mike isn't any closer to asking her to the Snow Ball than he was a few days ago," Dustin says.

"Dustin. I know you're trying to help, but Mike will do it when he's ready," Will tells him gently.

"That could be years from now! El wants to go to the Snow Ball."

"She told you that?" Lucas asks him.

"Well, no. Not really. But I know. *You* know. *Jonathan and Nancy* know. *We all* fucking know. Except for Mike, but he's an idiot."

"I think this is a bad idea," Will tells them honestly.

"It's a perfect idea! He was jealous when you gave her a *snow globe*. A snow globe! Because *he was planning to give her one*. And he was planning on asking her then, I know he was," Dustin wheedles.

"Doesn't it kind of make us assholes, though?"

Lucas and Dustin exchange a glance. "No!" Lucas cries vehemently, at the same time Dustin says, "Yeah, totally, but it's for a good cause. They'll both thank us later."

"So you keep saying," Lucas sighs. Dustin throws a pencil at him. Lucas and Dustin both turn back to Will.

"The *big guns*, Will," Dustin reminds him solemnly. Will sighs. Dustin sees the depth of his reluctance, because it's kind of hard to miss, what with all the sighing. "If this doesn't work, we'll abort. Okay?"

"Okay," Will agrees. He still thinks it's a terrible idea, but Mike will understand. Eventually.

"Great. Okay. So, Lucas, you'll have to stay in range. Find a spot halfway between Al's and Mike's house. I'll report to you, you report to Mike. Got it?"

"It's not exactly rocket science, Dustin."

Will heads for the phone before they start bickering.

At the Hopper household, Eleven hangs up the phone. Hopper's watching TV. Dustin would be thrilled to know that he's watching

Days of Our Lives.

"Hopper?"

Hopper turns to her, because it's a commercial. She smiles a little, because he's petting the kittens in his lap. He usually is cranky about the kittens, but she's noticed some new treats in the house and she's caught him talking to them in a weird, high-pitched voice. He's starting to like them, she can tell.

"Yeah?"

"Can I go skating with Will?"

"You're going out an awful lot this week," Hopper says without giving her a yes or a no. Eleven merely shrugs. "I don't know, kid. Al's is usually pretty busy, and you're supposed to be keeping a low profile. Can't you just go to Will's instead?"

Eleven shakes her head immediately. "Skating."

Hopper sighs. "Okay, but I'm going to sit in the parking lot. And I'll drive you both." He says it like it's a punishment, but Eleven smiles at him happily. She sits next to him and accepts a kitten from him. The Dustin kitten. They'll finish the show before leaving.

45 minutes and one case of mistaken identity later, Will and Eleven exit the station wagon and head for the doors. Dustin's taken to calling it the *Hoppermobile*.

"I'll be right here if there are any problems. You got enough money?" Eleven looks at Will. She doesn't know if she has enough money or not, because she is still learning about money. Will nods and pats his front pocket, where his wallet is.

"I've got it. Mom gave me money," Will tells Hopper, and Hopper nods. Makes a mental note to repay Joyce. It will give him an excuse to see her, anyway.

Will turns back to the entrance and waits for Eleven to follow. The inside of Al's is dark. Eleven looks at the arcade games with interest as they pass them. Will notices Dustin lurking behind the Claw, and

hastily points in the other direction toward the skating rink.

"Roller skating's really fun," Will tells her. And it is. He doesn't think Dustin's plan will work, but he's confident she'll have a good time. He's also confident that Mike will at least be a little less thrilled with this phase than the other 2 phases.

Eleven waits while he gets their skates. He doesn't have to ask her size, because their feet are the same size. She spins a wheel around with one finger. Will leads her to a bench and sits down. "Just lace them up like regular shoes," he tells her, and she does.

Dustin waits until they're both laced up. "Lucas. Are you in position? Over."

"Let me check. Over." He switches channels. "Mike? You copy? Over."

"I copy, Lucas. What's up? Over."

Lucas switches channels. "I'm in position. Over," Lucas tells Dustin.

"Awesome. Tell him they're hanging out. Over."

Mike listens to Lucas's frantic voice, telling him that Will and Eleven are hanging out. He's feeling a little better today, but not great. He's still running a fever, but at least he doesn't have any Kleenex shoved in his nose. That's a good start. He's not sure why Lucas and Dustin both keep freaking out about Eleven. They're being fucking weird, but maybe it's because Max is out of town and they don't have anything else to do.

"Dustin. He doesn't care, man," Lucas says.

"Did you tell him they're roller-skating?"

"Uh, no, I didn't. You said to tell him they were hanging out!"

"Tell him they're *roller-skating*!" Dustin shrieks it and a couple of people look over.

A couple of people look over at *Lucas*, too, because Dustin's voice carries very well over the super-comm. Lucas ignores them.

"Mike. You copy? Over."

"I copy, Lucas. What now? Over."

"Will and El are at Al's. Over."

Mike sits up suddenly and a pillow slides off the bed. He doesn't notice.

"Al's? Over."

"Yeah. They're roller-skating."

Roller-skating. He wanted to take Eleven roller-skating. He told *Will* he wanted to take her roller-skating, just a couple of days ago. He's trying not to be irritated but he's not entirely successful. He *told* Will, for Christ's sake. Mike stares moodily at his Vicks on his nightstand. The Vicks looks blankly back at him, because it's a fucking inanimate tube of Vicks. He takes a few deep breaths, as deep as his lungs will currently allow. He mentioned roller-skating to Eleven. Eleven was excited. Then he got sick. Maybe El asked Will to go. Will doesn't know how to say no. They are just skating. Skating is okay. *He* can still take her skating. He grabs his pillow off the floor and rearranges the stack before settling into them.

"Okay, Lucas. I copy. No big deal. Over."

Lucas grits his teeth and changes the channel. "He *doesn't care*, Dustin."

Dustin stares at the nearest teen in bewilderment and irritation. The teen takes one look at his expression and moves to a different game. "Tell him they're *holding hands*!" He forgets to end the communication officially, too.

"Why are they holding hands?"

"*They aren't!* Jesus. Keep up. Just tell him they're couple-skating."

"Are they even actually *skating* yet?"

"Does that actually matter?"

Lucas snorts. "I'll take that as a no, then."

"Shut up."

Will is gently coaxing Eleven to move her feet. And not to walk, but to glide instead. She's having problems with gliding. Gliding is hard. He grabs her hands and skates backward, towing her along.

"See? Like this. Not the backward part, but it should feel like this. Just move your feet like this, without walking. Okay?" He lets go and skates beside her. She's doing a little better, and she's giggling, so it's good enough.

"Where are we going?" Eleven asks as she tries to concentrate on making her feet work.

"What?"

"Where are we skating to?"

"Oh. Nowhere, really. You just go around in a big circle until you're tired of skating."

She nods. The flashing lights and the music remind her of the bowling alley. The lights are distracting, because she can't concentrate on her skates. She wobbles a little and Will grabs her hands again.

"Lucas. They're *actually holding hands* now," Dustin says gleefully. Another teenager playing next to him gives him an odd look. Dustin ignores him, too.

"*What?* Seriously?"

"Well, close enough. He's holding her hands to help her skate."

"Oh. I guess that's good enough," Lucas agrees. "Hang on." He switches channels. "Mike. Over."

"Yeah? Over."

"Eleven and Will are *couple-skating*."

Mike sits up. He doesn't even reprimand Lucas for not ending the communication the proper way, because he doesn't even notice. "What?" He yelps.

"They're holding hands and skating."

Mike just sits on the edge of his bed, trying to force his muddled brain to work. Then a thought, an *actual logical thought*, blessedly occurs to him. "How do *you* know? Al's isn't in range of my house."

"Um. Dustin's at the rink, and he told me."

"El doesn't know how to skate. Will's probably just helping her. What is *wrong* with you guys lately? You're both acting nuts. Over."

Lucas sighs. He feels like an idiot, because he's sitting on the curb in front of a gas station and people are looking at him curiously as they pass by. He stretches his feet out and looks at his shoes. They've reached the perfect stage, not too new to be uncomfortable, not so old that they're falling apart. He's more interested in his *shoes* than Dustin's fucking plan at the moment. He's getting bored with the plan, to be honest.

"Dustin. No go, man."

"*Shit*. Jesus Christ. He was fucking jealous like, a *week* ago. Tell him they're kissing or something."

"Gross. And Mike's not going to buy that, anyway."

"Give me a minute. Over."

Dustin sighs and watches his friends circle the rink. He turns back to the arcade, looking around for inspiration. He just needs to make Mike jealous. Just a little jealous. He just needs a push to ask her. He toys with the idea of telling Mike (or Lucas, but it's the same thing) that Will's asked her to the Snow Ball, but he knows Mike won't fall for it. Mike knows that Will would never ask her. Maybe Lucas was right. Maybe the plan *does* suck. He watches forlornly as Will and Eleven head for the concession stand. Dustin slumps to the floor immediately, ignoring the various stares from the kids around him. *Who gives a fuck*. Dustin gazes at his friends. Will gets a chocolate

frappe, because Will *always* gets a chocolate frappe. Eleven gets something that looks like vanilla. They sit at one of the tables.

"Lucas. Tell Mike they're drinking a shake." He says it dramatically, like it's vitally important information. Lucas is not impressed, and he's pretty sure Mike won't be, either.

"Are you kidding me? That's the best you can come up with?"

"They're sharing a straw. And holding hands."

Lucas sighs. "He's never going to fall for it, Dustin."

"*Just do it!*"

Mike's still in bed, reading a book when the super-comm crackles with static. Mike sighs.

"Yeah, Lucas. I copy. What is it *now*? Over."

"Will and El are sharing a shake. I mean, drinking a shake. And sharing a straw. Yeah. Sharing a straw. Oh, and they're holding hands."

Mike bolts up again. He's getting a good workout, at the very least. He tries to think about this rationally, as rationally as a fever will allow. The guys are acting weird. Something is going on. Something that he would normally be able to figure out easily. He thinks about Will and Eleven, sharing a straw like a couple of high school sweethearts in the 50's at a malt shop. Holding hands? *Holding hands*. And not while skating, which could be explained. Just holding hands. Mike's hair flops into his eyes and he brushes it back irritably. Will and Eleven are growing closer. But Will doesn't like her like that. He likes Jennifer. *Right*? And Eleven doesn't like *him* like that, either. *Right*? She said something like that at Joyce's party. What did she say? He can't quite remember, because the nasal decongestants are making him loopy. The fever is making him loopy. *Something* is sure as hell making him loopy.

There's a long pause, so Lucas improvises, because Dustin didn't tell him not to. "Dustin overheard Will say something about the Snow Ball." Mike's legs are on the floor before he even intends to move

them. The *Snow Ball*? He knows Will wouldn't ask her to the Snow Ball. Will is going to the Snow Ball with *Jennifer*. Right? And even if he *did* ask her to the Snow Ball, she would say no. Because dances are for *more than* friends. And Will is only her friend, Eleven said so. Mike knows all of this logically, but he's already changed out of pajamas and into a sweater and jeans. He runs his hand through his hair and calls it good, at least until he passes the mirror and catches a glimpse of himself. He grimaces at his reflection. Remembers he's basically been in bed for days, and makes slightly more effort with his appearance. He combs his hair absently. Even if Eleven wanted to go to the dance with *Will*, that would be okay. Well, not okay, he would *hate* that, but he wants her to be happy. But it can't hurt to go down there and hang out with them. And Dustin, since Dustin's there, too. Just hanging out with his friends. That's perfectly okay, he tells himself as he pulls on a jacket and takes the stairs two at a time.

"*Michael!*" His mom cries.

"Feeling better, mom! I'll be back soon!" He yells as he races past her and out the door. He forgets his super-comm, and he's definitely forgotten about Lucas.

"Mike? Mike, you copy?" Lucas asks, twirling in place in case the signal is better from a different angle. A little girl with blonde pigtails giggles at him as her mother straps her into a car. Lucas stops twirling and takes a few steps to the right instead. "*Mike?* You copy?" Silence. Apparently Mike does not copy.

Fuck it, Dustin thinks, giving up. He gave it his best shot, and it didn't work. He mentally gives himself an E for effort and a pat on the back before joining his friends at the table. He squeezes in next to Will. Eleven smiles at him and Will raises his eyebrows inquisitively.

"Hey guys, what's up?"

"How did it go?" Will asks. Dustin shakes his head sadly.

"How did what go?" Eleven asks.

Will and Dustin look at her awkwardly. "Um. What kind of shake is that?" Dustin asks, to avoid lying. Eleven hates lying of any kind.

"*Vanilla bean*," she enunciates carefully.

"Cool. Can I try?"

Eleven slides her glass toward him.

This way he's not really lying to Mike, either. Someone *will* be sharing her shake. And her straw, because he's already taking a sip.

Lucas is trudging toward Al's when a bicycle speeds past him and nearly knocks him over. He leaps out of the way. He recognizes the bike instantly; it would be kind of hard to miss since he's seen it nearly every day for years. It would also be hard to miss the mop of dark brown hair. Lucas grins and quickens his pace.

Eleven pauses before drinking any more of her shake, because she's getting the magnet feeling she sometimes gets. She knows Mike is home in bed, because he's sick. But the magnet feeling is strong. The magnet feeling tells her that Mike is very near. She scans the room but doesn't see him. She turns her face toward the entrance.

"What's wrong?" Dustin asks. Eleven doesn't answer; she's watching the door like she's waiting for someone. Dustin elbows Will excitedly, and then remembers that he probably shouldn't be sitting at the table if Mike comes in. Mike's supposed to see Will and Eleven, alone. Before he can even get up, Mike bursts in the door. He makes a beeline for the concession area. *Shit*. Will looks to Dustin for help, but Dustin shrugs. *Too late now*. Mike's already beside them, staring stupidly at them all.

He takes in the scene. Eleven on one side, Dustin and Will on the other. Will has a chocolate frappe, and is most certainly not sharing a drink with Eleven, although Dustin's drinking from Eleven's. Dustin immediately slides the glass back toward his friend. Mike takes in their faces. Eleven is looking at him happily, Will looks abashed, and Dustin has an overtly innocent expression on his face that Mike knows only too well. The penny finally drops. They've been acting fucking weird for *days*, and he knows exactly why. He glares at them both, and Dustin can tell the jig is up.

Dustin doesn't bother to apologize, because Mike's not going to say a

word in front of Eleven. He gives Mike a sunny little grin instead.

"Cool look, Mike. You know you're wearing two different shoes?"

Mike looks down at his feet. It's true. One of them is a brown loafer, the other is a sneaker.

"Why were you in such a rush?" Dustin teases, and Mike rolls his eyes. He thinks of Lucas parading Eleven in front of his window and tries not to laugh. He tries to stay angry with them, because they're *assholes*. But he can't help feeling a little amused, because they're also good friends. The *best*.

"I heard you guys were hanging out," Mike says pointedly, and Dustin laughs. Dustin feels no shame whatsoever, Mike can tell. And he understands. One of the party required assistance, and Dustin tried to come to his rescue.

"Mike," Eleven says, and he smiles at her. She scoots a few inches to the left so he can slide into the booth next to her. "Are you feeling better?"

Mike's throat is still sore but at least his nose isn't runny, so he supposes he *is* feeling better. A little, anyway. He's with his friends (most of them, anyway, and he has a feeling the last one will join them in a few minutes) and Eleven, and that certainly makes him feel better.

"Yeah, a little," Mike says.

"You look like shit, Mike," Dustin tells him bluntly.

"Thanks a lot, Dustin."

"Anytime."

"And don't do it again," he says, giving Dustin a knowing look. Dustin shrugs and reaches for Eleven's shake again.

"Can't make any promises, Mike."